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ABSTRACT

This issue contains several articles dealing with the International Literacy Year (ILY) proclaimed the United Nations (UN) for the year 1990. The first article, "1990, Proclaimed International Literacy Year by the United Nations," discusses the purpose of the observance of the ILY, namely the contribution to greater understanding by world public opinion of the various aspects of the problem of illiteracy and intensified efforts to spread literacy. It also highlights the achievements that are expected and the types of activities that should be carried out. "Illiteracy around the World: Situation and Trends" focuses on illiteracy statistics. Objectives listed in "Objectives for International Literacy Year" include increasing government action to eliminate illiteracy; increasing public awareness of the scope of the problem; increasing popular participation; increasing cooperation among the member states and within the UN system; and using the ILY to launch the plan of action to eradicate illiteracy by the year 2000. This article also discusses techniques that have been already undertaken or planned to promote the ILY. The issue concludes with an announcement of 1988 International Literacy Prizes. (YLB)

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1990, PROCLAIMED INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR BY THE UNITED NATIONS

It should be recalled that the proposal concerning an international literacy year was put forward at the 121st session (May-June 1985) of the Executive Board, which recommended to the General Conference that it 'address to the United Nations General Assembly an appeal to proclaim an International Literacy Year'.

The General Conference of Unesco, at its twenty-third session, held in Sofia in 1985, considered that the eradication of illiteracy by the year 2000 was of special urgency and should be a priority objective of the international community as a whole and of Unesco. It launched an appeal to proclaim an International Year, the observance of which would contribute to greater understanding by world public opinion of the various aspects of the problem of illiteracy and to intensified efforts to spread literacy and education.

In response to this appeal, the United Nations General Assembly, in December 1987, adopted resolution 42/104 proclaiming 1990 as International Literacy Year and inviting Unesco to assume the role of lead organization for its preparation and observance.

WHY AN INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR?

Firstly, because illiteracy is one of the major global problems of our era. Secondly, because illiteracy is closely related to underdevelopment and poverty and, moreover, because the elimination of illiteracy represents an essential condition for the development and the well-being of peoples and nations. Thirdly, because illiteracy is not a fatality but a condition - often a deep-rooted and refractory one - which, if combated with commitment, persistence and imagination, can be, and in numerous countries is being, overcome.

Illiteracy is a deep-rooted social phenomenon and many years of dedicated, persevering and imaginative effort in several related fields are normally required to eliminate it. To begin with, the eradication of illiteracy is inseparable from the objective of primary education for all. It is only through the universalization of primary education that illiteracy can be checked at its source. But if the problem of illiteracy is to be solved in a decade, not a generation, large-scale literacy programmes for out-of-school youth and adults will also be required. Indeed, such programmes are necessary, in any case, to create a supportive environment for the promotion of primary education. But it does not suffice to concentrate on literacy instruction, be it for children or adults; literacy skills cannot be maintained in an illiterate environment. Hence, literacy work must be accompanied and supported by post-literacy measures which make reading and writing useful, rewarding and increasingly necessary skills to possess.

It must also be borne in mind that the struggle against illiteracy is bound up with the quest for development. Illiteracy and poverty go not only hand in hand, but shoulder to shoulder, each supporting the other. Those who live in want today, in fear of tomorrow, who have neither a stake in society nor a hope in the future, are unlikely to be strongly motivated to become literate. What would prompt them to allot several hundred hours, needed in a harsh struggle for survival, to the arduous task of mastering an alphabet? To become literate, people must be motivated to learn and this will occur only when they perceive the possibility of improving their living conditions. Thus, the struggle for literacy is also, and at the same time, a struggle for development, justice, greater equality, respect of cultures and recognition of the human dignity of all and the claims of each to an economic, social and political role in society and the fruits which derive therefrom. It is this which makes the struggle against illiteracy difficult; it is also this which makes it essential and worth while.

WHAT WILL AN INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR ACHIEVE? WHAT ACTIVITIES SHOULD BE CARRIED OUT?

This will depend entirely upon what the international community and, more especially, national communities around the world make of this occasion. It could be a unique opportunity to renew commitments and reinvigorate actions to combat illiteracy throughout the Year and all through the ensuing decade.

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The Year should not be a celebration but a summons to action.

Then again, there is common agreement that the Year should be planned as a means, and a step in the process, of launching a global attack on illiteracy with the ambitious goal of eliminating it by the end of the century. Also, 1990 is the first year in which Unesco's third Medium-Term Plan will be applied, and International Literacy Year will help create a climate favourable to the launching of the plan of action to eradicate illiteracy by the year 2000, which is being prepared and will be submitted to the General Conference for consideration at its forthcoming session (autumn 1989).

In a preliminary document examining the possibilities and the problems involved in carrying out such a plan, Unesco stressed the fact that the task could not be accomplished unless Member States evinced a political will and commitment, unless a wide movement of international solidarity was established and unless the intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, the community groups working in the field in particular, played an active part.

Consulted in 1987 on the objectives for International Literacy Year and the procedures for its preparation and implementation, some 82 Member States and 40 international non-governmental organizations put forward pertinent comments and suggestions, which were to serve in the elaboration of A Practical Guide for the organization of the activities of the Year, which is in the course of preparation. The themes which emerged from Member States' replies were:

- need to alert and mobilize world public opinion in favour of action to promote literacy, particularly through the mass media;

- need for international co-operation and solidarity;

- leadership expected of Unesco in planning and implementing the programme of the Year;

- identification of priority 'target populations': rural residents, women and girls, as well as such groups as out- of-school youth, migrants and the handicapped;

- need to make literacy instruction functional by relating it to the needs of learners and to ensure follow-up in the form of post-literacy activities;

- importance of NGO participation in the Year.

Two conclusions can be drawn regarding the role Member States expect Unesco to play: firstly, the Organization is expected to promote public awareness of the problem of illiteracy and support for combating it; secondly, it is desired that Unesco continue and, to the extent possible, increase its services to Member States in the formulation and implementation of national and regional strategies for literacy, especially through facilitating regional co-operation and providing training and advisory services. Many Member States stress the need for Unesco to concentrate on 'practical' activities in planning the programme for ILY. The view of NGOs do not differ essentially from those expressed by Member States, the importance of 'concrete' activities being stressed even more strongly. In general, they replied in the manner which would be expected given their objectives and their memberships. Thus, students' organizations propose to direct their activities towards mobilizing students to participate in literacy work; women's organizations have a particular interest in schooling for girls and literacy instruction for women; labour organizations see literacy in its relation to the world of work. Still, certain general tendencies are evident concerning the activities NGOs propose to organize or consider should be organized during ILY:

- incorporation of literacy components into small-scale development projects or activities;

- preparation of projects designed for particular populations; e.g. women, the urban poor or unskilled workers;

- production of teaching and learning materials;

- training of extension workers;

- promotion of participation in literacy campaigns, especially that of students;

- stepping up of exchanges of information and experience in the field of literacy work.

ILLITERACY AROUND THE WORLD: SITUATION AND TRENDS

Awareness of the problem of illiteracy is at present becoming increasingly acute in the international community, and the importance of literacy training is now universally recognized. Many countries have already taken important measures in this area. The organization of mass literacy campaigns, some of which have had remarkable results – sometimes in a relatively short space of time, at the cost of considerable sacrifice –, the implementation of selective literacy programmes of varying scope and the efforts made to enrol in schools all children of school age illustrate the determination of Member States to wipe out the scourge of illiteracy.

If we take stock of what has been achieved over the past two decades, even without wishing to minimize the progress made, it becomes apparent that the record of the struggle against illiteracy is on the whole far from satisfactory given the means at our disposal and all that remains to be done to ensure effective access to education for everyone.

Illiteracy statistics, however, afford no grounds either for pessimism or for discouragement. Enrolment ratios, which had improved considerably in the 1960s, began to climb faster, mainly in the developing countries during the 1970s and early 1980s.

This rapid expansion of primary school enrolments was accompanied by a perceptible increase in the world total of adults (15 years and over) who had received literacy training, which rose from 1,708 million in 1975 to 2,314 million in 1985, an increase of some 35 per cent in ten years.

Despite these efforts illiteracy persists, often going hand in hand with poverty, and there continue to be disturbing trends. In spite of the decrease in the global illiteracy rate the absolute number of adult illiterates is steadily increasing at the same time as the world adult population, which in 1985 had increased by nearly 40 per cent since 1970.

According to estimates and projections made by Unesco's Office of Statistics, in 1985 there were throughout the world some 889 million illiterates aged 15 and over, or 27.7 per cent of the population in that age-group. The worst affected regions were Asia, with an illiteracy rate (36.3 per cent) higher than the average, but above all with an extremely high absolute number of illiterates (666 million), and Africa, with a lower absolute number (162 million) but a higher illiteracy rate (54 per cent). It is also to be noted that in 1985 three quarters of the world's illiterates, i.e. 669 million, were to be found in nine countries, six of which are in Asia.

While illiteracy affects primarily the developing countries (869 million persons or some 98 per cent of the total number of illiterates in the world) and, furthermore, absolute illiteracy is rather rare in the industrialized countries (20 million persons), it should be mentioned that a new phenomenon is being taken into consideration: in recent years certain industrialized countries which thought they had solved the problem of illiteracy 50 years back, or more, have discovered, and officially admitted, the existence of a not insignificant percentage of '<u>functional illiterates</u>' among their nationals. Unlike illiterates, as the term is usually understood, functional illiterates may know the alphabet or figures, but their rudimentary knowledge is too scant to enable them to participate effectively in social life or to find employment in a modern economy. Surveys have shown that in some countries the proportion of the population faced with difficulties of this kind may attain from 5 to 10 per cent, in some cases even more.

Overall, considerably more women than men suffer from illiteracy, 34.9 per cent of women being illiterate at the present time as against 20.5 per cent of men. Illiteracy is also to be found among young people: 84,300,000 illiterates are aged between 15 and 19. Furthermore, in 1985, more than 100 million children aged between 6 and 11 in the developing countries were not attending school.

OBJECTIVES FOR INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

The objectives of International Literacy Year as approved by the Unesco General Conference at its twenty-fourth session, in the autumn of 1987, are:

(i) increasing action by the governments of Member States affected by illiteracy or functional illiteracy to eliminate these problems, particularly through education in rural areas and urban slums, in favour of women and girls and among populations and groups having special educational problems and needs;

(ii) increasing public awareness of the scope, nature and implications of illiteracy as well as of the means and conditions of combating it. In particular, an effort should be made to alert public opinion to the rate of illiteracy among women and its implication for the well-being of their children, the lower rate of school attandance among girls than among boys and the connection between illiteracy, on the one hand, and poverty, underdevelopment and economic, social and cultural exclusion on the other;

(iii) increasing popular participation, within and among countries, in efforts to combat illiteracy, particularly through activities of governmental and non-governmental organizations, voluntary associations and community groups;

(iv) increasing co-operation and solidarity among Member States in the struggle against illiteracy;

(v) increasing co-operation within the United Nations system and, more generally, among all intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations in the struggle against illiteracy;

(vi) using International Literacy Year for launching the plan of action for the eradication of illiteracy by the year 2000 and for addressing issues of critical importance for the progress of literacy, such as reducing the number of primary school drop-outs and establishing post-literacy programmes to prevent relapse into illiteracy.

One of the main goals of International Literacy Year is therefore to lay the foundations for long-term action, to create conditions favourable to the launching of a plan of action for the decade, from 1990 to the end of the century, by mobilizing international public opinion in support of the literacy teaching efforts of the governments and organizations.

INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION

(i) Encouraging, especially during International Literacy Year, national fund-raising campaigns, each of which could be devoted to a specific literacy project.... in one Third World country. Such a fund-raising drive could be conducted by the non-governmental organizations interested in promoting world literacy. Unesco would have contributed to devising the literacy plans and strategies to be considered for such a 'one-to-one' co-operative scheme.

(ii) Also, outside the context of this series of national fund-raising campaigns for world literacy, Unesco could promote even further 'one-to-one' linkages between donors (national agencies for international development assistance, foundations, national non-governmental organizations, religious groups, other private initiative, etc.) and selected Third World literacy projects. This approach would of course include TCDC.

(Suggestions made by the Special Committee of the Executive Board in its in-depth study on 'Unesco's literacy work: achievements, strategies and future action'.)

PROSPECTS

Various meetings organized by Unesco at the regional or the international level were held in 1988. Others are scheduled for 1989 and 1990. Their object is to review the steps taken or to be taken at the international, regional and national levels in connection with the observance of the International Year and to consider the most effective ways and means of implementing overall action conducive to the generalization of education in Member States and to its qualitative improvement. For 1990 might be mentioned:

. The 42nd session of the International Conference on Education, which will be held in September 1990 - that is, 25 years after the World Congress of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy held in Tehran in September 1965 - and will be devoted to illiteracy, serving as a world congress of ministers of education on illiteracy; and

. The intergovernmental symposium organized jointly by Unesco, UNICEF and the World Bank, with as its theme, education for all, to be held in March 1990, with a view to launching a plan of action in this field.

SUGGESTIONS, PROMOTION AND DOCUMENTATION

* In order to suggest concrete forms of action, the Fourth Collective Consultation of the Non-Governmental Organizations on Literacy, held in Bangkok (Thailand) in December 1987, recommended that a Guide to activities be prepared. Produced with the help of Unesco by the Standing Committee of Non-Governmental Organizations in consultative relationship with Unesco, this Practical Guide was issued in 1988. Deliberately concrete and readily applicable to a wide variety of situations throughout the world, the Guide was designed for NGOs and Unesco Clubs so that they might find inspiration for renewing ongoing activities or for joining in the struggle, to the extent of their means, against illiteracy, in accordance with five of the main six objectives of the Year.

This Practical Guide is available (English/French/Spanish, one copy per language version, reproduction being authorized) from the NGO Standing Committee, Room S.388, NGO Room, Unesco, 7 place de Fontenoy, 75700 PARIS.

* As was the case on the occasion of other International Years, International Literacy Year has been endowed with an emblem. For this purpose the International Association of Art launched a contest open to amateurs and professionals alike in all countries. The emblem designed by the Japanese graphic artist Kohichi Imakita was selected from among 300 entries from 82 countries. This emblem will appear on the covers of books and periodicals, on posters, calendars, letters, stamps, etc., in short, wherever ILY can be called to mind. Unesco has also requested the Universal Postal Union to ask the postal services of its Member States to issue special stamps on the occasion of ILY. If a sufficient number of such stamps are issued, Unesco intends to organize an exhibition in September 1990.

* An international poster contest was launched by the Unesco Secretariat through the National Commissions for Unesco and the NGOs. Open to amateur and professional artists, it should lead to the selection of a poster on the theme of ILY and the related promotional activities, which will be widely circulated in the Organization's six official languages by May/June 1989.

* To help alert public opinion and the institutions concerned, the Secretariat plans to issue specific and diversified materials, more especially in the course of 1989. It foresees, in particular:

- publication in four languages of the report 'Objective: Literacy' devoted to ILY;

- publication in six languages of a special number of the quarterly 'Prospects';

- publication of a special number of 'The Unesco Courier';

- publication of two special numbers of 'Adult Education - Information Notes' (including this one);

- periodical publication of a 'Newsletter on International Literacy Year' (three numbers in 1989);

- distribution in four languages of a guide for Member States on activities to undertake for the International Year;

- distribution in three languages of a practical ILY Guide for non-governmental organizations and Unesco Clubs;

- production of a promotional document on ILY, and other documents.

* More detailed information on the plan of action for a massive reduction of illiteracy by the year 2000 will be given in the next number of 'Adult Education - Information Notes'.

Any information and suggestions relating to International Literacy Year are welcome. The most apt will be mentioned in our second number devoted to the Year.

1988 INTERNATIONAL LITERACY PRIZES

On 8 September 1988 International Literacy Day was celebrated by Member States for the twenty-third consecutive time. As the Director-General of Unesco recalled in an address given at the Headquarters on this occasion, this Day was instituted by Unesco in 1966 on the proposal of the World Congress of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy, held in Tehran in 1965, and afforded an opportunity of rewarding the meritorious efforts of institutions and individuals working in the cause of literacy. In 1988 it was marked by the preparations for the celebration of International Literacy Year in 1990.

The International Jury for Literacy Prizes was made up of Malcom S. Adiseshiah, I. Al-Shibly, G.N. Filonov, Paulo Freire, Martha V. Mlagala Mvungi and Thomas G. Sticht. It examined 25 nominations submitted by governments and non-governmental organizations.

The Nadezhda K. Krupskaya Prize was awarded to the National Literacy Centre of Angola for having steadfastly pursued its literacy efforts, despite war and material difficulties, providing instruction for 6,500,000 participants in six national languages and Portuguese.

The International Reading Association Award was conferred upon the National Literacy Plan of Argentina for having mobilized the support of numerous public and private institutions to launch a literacy plan, based on a nationwide survey, and making effective use of radio broadcasts to provide instruction for those living in remote areas or unable for other reasons to attend classes.

The Noma Prize was awarded to the Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad (Pakistan), for the unique example this pioneering university sets in responding to the needs of the illiterate and semi-literate rural population, especially women, for whom it provides training in areas of particular interest and use to them, such as child care, health and hygiene, agriculture and animal husbandry.

The Iraq Literacy Prize was awarded to the Ministry of Handicrafts and Social Affairs of the Kingdom of Morocco for applying scientific evaluation methods in its annual literacy campaigns and using the findings to improve subsequent programmes, for providing education for 180,000 women and girls in a variety of settings and for establishing post-literacy programmes in 232 vocational training centres.

In addition to these prizes, the International Jury awarded honourable mentions:

- For the Nadezhda K. Krupskaya Prize, to the Educar Foundation basic education project, Baixada Fluminese (Brazil); to Professor Ramlal Parikh of India; and to the Executive Committee for the Eradication of Illiteracy and Complementary Education of the District of Binh Minh in Cuu Long Province (Socialist Republic of Viet Nam).

- For the International Reading Association Literacy Award, to Southam Incorporated (Canada); to Manica Provincial Literacy Service (People's Republic of Mozambique); and to Songtao Miao County of Guizhou Province (People's Republic of China).

- For the Noma Prize, to the Literacy and Complementary Education Movement of Nhot Ngum Canton of Xieng Khouang Province (Lao People's Democratic Republic); and to Mr Michael Marquet (New Zealand).

- For the Iraq Literacy Prize, to Literacy House, Lucknow (India); and to the Regency of Sumenep in East Java (Indonesia).

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